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ABSTRACT

In order to investigate the nature of character portrayals in U.S. television commercials, a content analysis was done on a random sample of 2,604 U.S. television commercials which were videotaped in March 1981. This analysis included both demographic characteristics and more subtle aspects of gender differences, such as concerns, relationships with others, and social power. Each commercial was analyzed by four trained coders (three female, one male) and demographic information on 6,500 characters compared with 1980 U.S. Census data. Commercials were found to significantly underrepresent females, teenagers, the elderly, all racial minorities, and all non-professional occupations except farming. Women were portrayed in occupational roles more often (23.6%) than as homemakers (9.6%); however, females made up the majority of characters in only six types of commercials: cleaners, hygiene, feminine hygiene and beauty, apparel, toys, and home furnishings. Husbands had more power of approval; wives were more likely to have expert power and to seek approval. A value analysis found that commercials stressed values that were self-oriented rather than altruistic, and that this was most true of commercials shown during children's programs. Conclusions call for further research on how television affects the cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors of viewers, with particular attention to exploring how the content of commercials varies across different cultures and in different countries. A five-page list of references completes the document. (JB)

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CHARACTER PORTRAYALS AND SOCIAL VALUES IN TV COMMERCIALS

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CHARACTER PORTRAYALS AND SOCIAL VALUES IN TV COMMERCIALS

In order to describe the "world" shown on TV commercials, a content analysis was done on a random sample of 2604 TV commercials videotaped in March 1981. Demographic information on 6500 characters was compared with 1980 U.S. Census data. Commercials were found to significantly underrepresent females, teenagers, the elderly, all racial minorities, and all non-professional occupations except farmers. Women were portrayed in occupational roles more often (23.6%) than as homemakers (9.6%). Husbands had more power of approval; wives were more likely to have expert power and to seek approval. A value analysis found that commercials stressed values that were self-oriented rather than altruistic, and that this was most true of commercials shown during children's programs.

In modern day socialization research, television is viewed as one of the major influences in the lives of growing children. A recent report by the National Institute of Mental Health (1982) concluded:

> The research findings of the past decade have reaffirmed the powerful influence of television on viewers. Almost all the evidence testifies to television's role as a formidable educator whose effects are both pervasive and cumulative...Television viewing is so entrenched in American daily life that it can only be regarded as a major socializing influence almost comparable to the family, the schools, the church, and other socializing institutions...
>
> -NIMH Report, 1982: 87

As developmental psychology expands to consider the entire life-span, television should and will be seen as an important influence in the life of most adults as well as children. Yet, for the most part, still relatively little is known about the influence of television on the cognitions, attitudes and

behaviors of those who watch it, or even what they see when they do. As Gerbner (1972) noted over a decade ago, "there is probably no area of important social policy in which far reaching decisions are made with as little reliable, systematic, cumulative and comparable information about trends and the state of affairs as the area of the mass production and distribution of the most broadly shared messages of our culture (television)." (Gerbner, 1972:157)

What do we see when we watch television? Clearly it is difficult to do research on the possible influence of something, anything, without knowing what it is. In this respect, television can be thought to be an "environment" which influences us through exposure. Admittedly the "environment" of television has a form and content which is different from everyday life; however, we could say at least that television "portrays" a world recognized to be similar to the world of everyday life. The nature of that similarity is the focus of this paper.

If we are interested in the influence of television, then, we shall have to describe it in some precise detail. This involves the collection of representative samples of it and an analysis of the content of these samples along some meaningful dimensions. While Gerbner and others have accomplished this for both children's and dramatic program content on U.S. television (Gerbner, 1980a,1980b;Barcus, 1977; DeFleur, 1964), there is considerably less research describing TV commercials (Barcus, 1980; Scheibe, 1983).

This paucity of research is surprising given the ubiquity of ads on American television, and given that the purpose of ads is different from the

purpose of program content. For the most part, while the program content is simply designed to hold the attention of the audience by informing or entertaining (Comstock, 1978; Tuchman, 1974), the commercials are specifically designed to use both entertainment and information to persuade, to bring about attitude and behavior change (Krugman, 1965; Vaughn, 1980; Sawyer & Ward, 1977). The success of a commercial is inherently tied to the viewer's understanding, acceptance and integration of the commercial message into his or her own attitude and value structure (Burnett, 1961).

Television advertisements are extremely pervasive throughout U.S. network television, with some types of programming containing as many as 25-30 product advertisements per hour (Scheibe, 1983). The average American viewer is exposed to more than 25,000 TV commercials a year (Comstock, 1978). Furthermore, commercials are short and easily remembered, even by young children. They frequently consist of "social scripts" (Collins, et al., 1978), brief stories about interactions between people that have consequences or morals illustrating everyday situations. And finally, exposure to TV commercials is in some ways less subject to selectivity by the viewer than is exposure to programs. While viewers can select the programs that they view, they cannot do the same with commercials; viewers may choose not to pay attention to a particular commercial that comes on, but they cannot tune in to catch the commercial of their choice.

Aside from advertising effectiveness studies, most of the research on TV commercials has been related either to children's ads (Barcus, 1977; 1981) or to sex role portrayals (Courtney and Whipple, 1974; Beuf, 1974; O'Donnell & O'Donnell, 1978; Scheibe, 1979; Culley & Bennett, 1975). Practically all content analyses of the commercial advertisements aimed at children have looked

at product information (types of products most prevalent, techniques used, presence of disclaimers or host selling, etc.). Most studies have found that 60-70% of all commercials during children's programs are for food and food services (Barcus, 1977; Atkin, 1982), while the remainder are for toys. A few studies indicate a growing number of public service announcements, such as nutrition ads, during children's programs (Scheibe, 1983).

Although the concern over the amount and nature of TV advertising to children led both federal agencies with responsibility for television (the FTC and the FCC) to hold hearings regarding possible ill effects, few actions have been taken. The FCC recommended that the number of ads on children's programs be reduced, and the distinction between the two types of television content (programs and ads) be made especially clear to the child audience (Adler, 1980a). In 1978, the FTC held hearings regarding the influence on children of nutritional information given in ads (Adler, 1980a;Rossiter, 1980), but no recommendations were made as a consequence of these hearings.

In addition to the issues described above, the question of the effectiveness of ads directed to children and their comprehension of the selling intent of ads has received extensive consideration by researchers (Atkin, 1982; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974). Recent studies have also begun to identify the ways in which ads attract and hold attention of children (Huston et al., 1981; Anderson et al., 1979).

Content analyses of ads appearing during adult programs have focussed almost entirely on the image of women in TV commercials, and a number of studies of the effects of TV commercials on viewers have dealt with stereotyped attitudes toward women (Cheles-Miller, 1975; Pingree, 1978; Courtney & Whipple, 1981). Just as research on the content of children's programs and advertisements

grew out of parental concerns (Adler, 1980a) the studies of sex role portrayals in TV programming and commercials initially arose from the women's movement in the late sixties and early seventies. Many of the earliest analyses consisted only of qualitative descriptions of the stereotyped way in which women were depicted (e.g., Gornick & Moran, 1971). Bardwick and Schumann (1967) wrote, for example: "The happy TV mother is one who can't be discriminated from her daughter in skin texture, hair color, waistline, or dancing. To be youthful is to be beautiful, is to be loved." (pp. 20-21).

Critics focussed on what they considered to be the "sexist nature" of TV ad portrayals, particularly the emphasis on the female as either a sex object or housewife (Beuf, 1974). In Woman in Sexist Society (1971), Komisar wrote that advertising "legitimizes the idealized, stereotyped roles of woman as temptress, wife, mother, and sex object, and portrays women as less intelligent and more dependent than men. It makes women believe that their chief role is to please men and that their fulfillment will be as wives, mothers and homemakers..." (p. 310).

There have been many more quantitative analyses of characters in magazine advertisements than of those in television commercials (Courtney & Whipple, 1981). The first quantitative analysis of TV commercials was done by Dominick and Rauch (1972), who recorded the sex, age, occupation and setting of characters, as well as product type and sex of voiceover, in nearly one thousand commercials shown during prime time over a two-week period. These researchers found that only 6% of the ads used a female voiceover while 87% used a male voiceover, that nearly three times as many women as men were judged to be in home settings, and that 56% of the women with an apparent occupation were judged to be house-

wives. They also noted a tendency toward "youthfulness" in the commercials, particularly for females.

In the same year, N.Y. National Organization for Women (1972) reported their results of monitoring some 1200 commercials over the period of a year and a half (Hennessee & Nicholson, 1972). Their investigation dealt primarily with how the female character was presented emotionally, physically, mentally and occupationally. Their conclusions were that in 37.5% of the commercials women were shown as "men's adjuncts," in 33.9% they were shown dependent on men, in 24.3% they were submissive, and in 17.1% they were unintelligent. In 16.7% of the ads women were regarded as sex objects, in 42.6% they were shown as household functionaries, and in 22.7% they were "demeaned housekeepers." The researchers concluded that "only 0.3% of the ads showed women as autonomous people, leading independent lives of their own" (Hennessee & Nicholson, 1972).

Courtney and Whipple (1974) summarized the NY/NOW and Dominick and Rauch studies, along with two others done a few years later. They concluded that women were "overrepresented in home settings, as well as in family/home occupations" (p. 115), that men and women were still being shown in traditional sex roles in commercials, and that over the two-year period covered by the four studies little had really changed.

A number of other content analyses were conducted in the mid-seventies looking at voiceovers, occupational roles and activities of male and female characters in prime time commercials (McArthur & Resko, 1975; Lundstrom & Sciglimpaglia, 1977; Maracek et al., 1978) and in commercials during children's programs (Streicher, 1974; Barcus, 1977). Their findings were similar to earlier studies regarding the dominance of male characters and the limited or stereotypical protrayals of females. By the late 1970s, however, there was

some disagreement among researchers as to how much character portrayals had changed.

O'Donnell and O'Donnell (1978), summarizing the research to date, concluded that very little had changed over the course of the decade, saying "the picture presented by television commercials is unchanged - the home is the woman's domain" (p. 58). Schneider and Schneider (1979), however, looked at trends in sex role portrayals between 1971 and 1976 and concluded that although women still were portrayed in more narrowly defined roles than men ("significantly younger, employed less frequently, inside residences more often than men, and so forth" (p. 83)), there were some indications of change. They found that with respect to U.S. Census data concerning marital status and age, female characters roles were becoming more realistic compared to the roles of male characters.

Culley and Bennett (1980), comparing an analysis of 359 ads in 1974 with findings of Dominick and Rauch in 1971, also found indications of changes in the portrayals of women, with a decrease in the percentage of women shown as housewives and mothers and an increase in the number of women shown in white collar occupations. Still, they concluded (based on the presence or absence of females in certain product categories of ads), that "...women are portrayed in most advertisements as being more concerned with personal appearance and household matters and less concerned with durable good purchases and complex decisions." (p. 168).

Using a broader range of commercials covering an entire viewing week, Scheibe (1979) found much more evidence of change. Analyzing 6200 commercials in 1975, she found that only slightly more women were portrayed as homemakers (21%) than those shown in occupational roles (18.3%), as well as large increases

range and number of occupations shown for women. Like Schneider and Schneider, she found that while the incidence of occupational portrayals had increased for women, male characters continued to be shown only rarely involved in traditional female activities such as housework or caring for children. Comparing the data on occupational roles of characters in the commercials with information from the U. S. Census, Scheibe found that commercials greatly overrepresented both male and female workers in professional and managerial occupations, but that the "proportions of men to women in each occupational category were fairly consistent with the Census statistics except in service, clerical and private service occupations, all of which greatly underrepresented women" (p. 25). The overall ratio of males to females in occupational roles on television was 2.4 to 1, compared with 1.7 to 1 in the actual labor force. This was a substantial departure from DeFleur's (1964) earlier findings for television program portrayals, which showed a ratio of 5.2 working males for every working female, at a time when the actual labor force ratio was only 2.2 to 1.

Courtney and Whipple (1981) summarized all the findings from content analyses documenting the existence of sex stereotyping in the media in their introduction to an annotated bibliography of more than 250 articles related to sex roles in the media. They pointed out that all of the studies cited reached similar conclusions:

> that woman's place in advertising is seen to be the home, and that her labor force roles are underrepresented. Women are typically portrayed as housewives and mothers, as dependent on men, and sometimes as unintelligent and subservient...On the other hand, men are depicted as the voices of authority, the older and wiser advice-givers and demonstrators. They are shown in a wider range of occupations and roles in their working and leisure lives or as beneficiaries of women's work in the home. (p. vii)

However, Courtney and Whipple concluded that except for voiceovers, "the

trend has been toward a gradual narrowing of the differences between role portrayals based on sex" (p. vii).

Despite the similarities of findings across most studies over time, several researchers have argued that caution should be used in comparing the different studies and in interpreting their results (Courtney & Whipple, 1974; Busby, 1975; Scheibe,1979). The studies used quite different methodologies, including sampling procedures and coding categories, or specific aspects of the methods and coding systems were unreported. Most of the studies were heavily dependent on the judgment and interpretation of coders, some of whom may have had a biased viewpoint. In some instances the samples were quite small, or were taken within very limited periods of time, which brings into question their representativeness and subsequent poor generalizability to all commercials being shown at that point in history.

Before being able to draw conclusions about how all characters are portrayed in U.S. TV commercials, these methodological questions need to be cleared up. This study was designed to analyze the nature of character portrayals (analyzing both demographic characteristics and more subtle aspects of gender differences, such as concerns, relationships to others, and social power), using a large random sample of TV commercials. Rather than limit the sample only to commercials shown during prime time, this sample draws evenly from all days of the week and from all primary viewing hours of the day (7 a.m. to 1 a.m.). In addition, the study was designed to take into account two other important questions.

First, in order to make some assessment of how "realistic" the character

portrayals are, the demographics (sex, age, race, occupation) for the total sample of TV commercial characters were compared with data from the 1980 U.S. Census. This gave some basis for being able to discuss the "world" shown on TV commercials in terms of reality, and to discover in what ways that world differs from the "real" world.

Second, even a detailed analysis of the characteristics of TV commercial characters doesn't provide a complete or "true" picture of the messages in commercials regarding what people should be like. For example, messages about desirable attributes or behaviors for males and females may appear in commercials in which there are no characters at all. In addition, characters are often portrayed in a negative light in order to get across the opposite message (i.e. don't be like this person); a content analysis of characters alone is unable to make this distinction. How then can we describe what TV commercials show or tell viewers about what qualities and behaviors are most desirable or appropriate for members of a given socity?

Advertisers themselves frequently use the term "values" to describe the personal-attribute or goal-related messages used in ads (Burnett, 1961; Arlen, 1979; Becker & Connor, 1981). Although the term "value" is used in many different contexts in sociology, psychology and communications, Rokeach's (1968; 1973) definition of "values" comes very close to describing this idea of desirable attributes and goals. Values, Rokeach believes, are different from attitudes and beliefs; they have to do with "modes of conduct and end-states of existence that are personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence" (Rokeach, 1973:5).

Rokeach identified 18 instrumental values (ideal modes of behavior), such as "ambitious," "cheerful," "clean," and "loving," and 18 terminal values (ideal

end-states of existence), such as "an exciting life," "happiness," and "social recognition." Using the term "value" in this light, it appears that advertisements do frequently rely on the presentation of values and value systems in relation to the benefits of product use. TV commercials often stress the ideal modes or qualities of behavior as well as desirable personal attributes, such as cleanliness, beauty, youthfulness, and cheerfulness. They also clearly imply ideal end-states or goals that those modes of behavior may lead to, such as happiness, social recognition, and an exciting life.

In his later work, Rokeach has focussed primarily on attempts to change an individual's hierarchy of values (Rokeach, 1973; 1979). Rather than attempting to change behavior by changing attitudes, Rokeach posits that in order to modify behavior people "must be made aware of inconsistencies in their value/attitude systems and conscious feelings of self-dissatisfaction must be aroused" (cited in Vitch, 1982). His research has indicated that feedback about one's own value system isn't necessary to initiate value change, but merely feedback about the value systems of others (Rokeach & McClellan, 1972). Furthermore, the evidence shows that value change may be initiated through self-confrontation regardless of the channel through which the information about the value systems of others is presented (Rokeach, 1979).

Rokeach's categories of values have never been applied to research on the content and effects of advertisements. A few attempts to analyze the values present in other media forms have been made (Albrecht, 1956), although the categories of values were not the same as those used by Rokeach. The issue of value change resulting from exposures to advertising messages is an intriguing one, and may prove a fruitful avenue for empirical research; however, first

we need to determine whether or not it is possible to analyze the content of TV commercial messages using Rokeach's categories, and if so, identify which values are most frequently present in those commercials.

In addition to an analysis of character portrayals, then, this study looks at the social values that are expressed in U.S. network TV commercials. Both character portrayals and values were analyzed for the total sample of commercials, and also by product type and type of program during which the commercial appeared. Particular interest was given to character portrayals and values appearing during children's programs, and to differences between TV commercials directed primarily to females and those directed to males.

METHODS

A random sample of TV commercials was taken during the month of March, 1981. A "sample week" of television was constructed using a randomized block design, randomly selecting one Sunday, one Monday, and so forth from the month of March. Each day the programming was monitored from 7 a.m. to 1 a.m., those being identified as the primary viewing hours (Nielsen, 1982). The three major networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) were monitored through their affiliates in Syracuse, NY. A random rotation schedule for monitoring the three stations was designed, so that each station would be monitored for one hour out of every three.

All commercials that appeared, whether local or national, were videotaped for coding, except those for television programs, feature films, or station identifications. Duplicates of the same commercial were included and coded

the same as any other commercial.

Variables for coding were grouped into 4 indices: commercial demographics (day, time, station and program type), general commercial content (product type and values), character demographics (sex, age, race, occupation), and character portrayals (concerns, relationships, social power). The coding categories for each variable were selected and operationalized as follows:

COMMERCIAL DEMOGRAPHICS and PRODUCT TYPE categories were developed by the first author in a previous study, and were modified slightly during coder training.

CHARACTER VARIABLES: All characters who spoke, were featured prominently, and/or were portrayed in a role or activity unique from the other characters were coded individually. Large groups of characters who were all doing the same thing, and were fairly homogenous, were coded as "crowds." Each crowd was treated as one character in coding the other character variables of sex, age, race, occupation, concerns, and power whenever possible. Voiceovers were considered characters only if they interacted directly with another onscreen character or with each other.

CHARACTER DEMOGRAPHICS categories were taken from U.S. Census reports. Several occupational categories were added to those used by the Census. "Celebrity" was used to identify well-known celebrities that appeared on ads; "Sports/Entertainment" was used for non-celebrity characters shown in sports or entertainment roles. Both of these types of occupations were listed as "Professional" under the Census categories, so were included with other professionally employed characters for comparisons with the Census data. Characters who appeared to be representing the company or product directly, expecially if they were speaking to the TV audience, were coded as "Product Representatives" and were included in "Managerial" for

Census comparisons. "Homemakers" were defined as a character verbally identified as a homemaker or housewife, and/or an adult shown in the home doing housework (except those who clearly had a job outside the home, or gave an explanation or excuse for why they were doing housework). Characters who were not shown in any of the above occupational roles were coded as having no occupation shown.

CHARACTER PORTRAYAL categories for the variables concerns and relationships were developed for this study during coder training sessions. The categories of social power were adapted from French and Raven's (1960) bases of social power, modified to include categories representing the absence of each form of power (i.e., seeking expertise or approval from another person).

VALUES variables were adapted from Rokeach's (1979) list of instrumental and terminal values. During coder training it became clear that some modifications of Rokeach's original list of 18 instrumental and 18 terminal values would be necessary to fit the nature of TV commercial content and to allow for more reliable coding decisions. For example, the terminal values of "a world of beauty," "a world of peace," "national security," and "salvation" were dropped because they were never found to be present in the pre-trial coding samples of commercials. Several values were added to Rokeach's list, particularly ones relating to physical appearance and sexuality: instrumental values of "beautiful," "frugal," "sexy" and "youthful," and terminal values of "a healthy life," "freedom from pain," "physical comfort," and "sexual gratification."

The values were also identified as either self-oriented or altruistic (other-oriented). The final list of values coded appears in Table 1. Values were coded for each commercial as a whole, and not specifically related to

Table 1. Instrumental and Terminal Values Coded as Present or Absent.

INSTRUMENTAL VALUES:

Self-Oriented:
- Ambitious
- Beautiful
- Capable
- Cheerful
- Clean
- Imaginative
- Independent
- Physically Powerful
- Sexy
- Smart
- Youthful

Altruistic:
- Broadminded
- Courageous
- Forgiving
- Frugal
- Helpful
- Honest
- Loving
- Obedient/Polite
- Responsible

TERMINAL VALUES:

Self-Oriented:
- Accomplishment
- Exciting Life
- Freedom
- Freedom from Pain
- Happiness
- Healthy Life
- Physical Comfort
- Prosperous Life
- Self Respect
- Sexual Gratification
- Social Recognition

Altruistic:
- Equality
- Family Well-Being
- Love
- True Friendship
- Wisdom

characters. Each value was coded individually as present or absent, regardless of its implied relationship to other values. Therefore, any number of values (both instrumental and terminal) could be found present in a given commercial, or a commercial could have no values present at all.

Each commercial was analyzed by one of four trained coders (3 female, 1 male). Prior to the final content analysis, a coder reliability test was conducted, using a random subsample of 10 commercials. Coder reliability was determined in three ways: percentage of agreement averaged across all pairs of coders for each commercial (ranging from .795 to .958, average of .908); percentage of agreement across all 10 commercials for each pair of coders (ranging from .888 to .933, average of .905); and percentage of agreement across all coder pairs and commercials for each variable coded (lowest average agreement was .67 for the value "capable," and 70% of all the variables had an average agreement of .9 or better).

Frequency distributions were tabulated for all variables, and crosstab analyses were made for each value by time, program and product. Single sample chi squares were computed for comparisons between TV commercial demographics and those from the U.S. Census data, using the Census figures as expected frequencies. Chi squares were also computed for sex differences in concerns and power, with expected frequencies based on an assumed 50/50 ratio for males and females.

RESULTS

The Sample

The final sample consisted of 2604 commercials containing 6500 characters. There were a total of 1425 different commercials for 1018 different products or services.

The number of commercials that appeared in an hour of programming varied widely over the course of the day and week. The lowest frequency of commercials per hour occurred during Sunday morning (3.7) and Sunday daytime (10.3); the highest frequency occurred during weekday daytime hours (27.1). Prime-time programs had relatively few commercials per hour (15.4); the average number of commercials per hour was 20.7.

Because the sample of commercials covers an entire week of viewing, rather than only those times with the most heavy viewing (prime time) as has been the case with most earlier research, there are several implications that should be kept in mind. Of the 126 hours monitored, 40 hours were during weekday daytime; this period also had the highest number of commercials per hour, so that more than one third of the commercials in the sample were recorded on weekdays during the day. Nearly 23% of the commercials appeared during news programs (which occur throughout the day and evening), and another 20% appeared during soap operas. More than one fifth of the commercials were for food products, 10% were for retail stores, 7.7% were for cleaners and household aids, and 6.7% were for medicines. A substantial number of commercials, then, were for housework-related products.

Some caution, therefore, should be exercised in comparing these results with the findings of previous studies of both programs and commercials. We have argued, however, that the breadth of the sample allows us to both look at the overall picture presented in TV commercials, as well as how it varies during different times of the day and week and different types of programs.

Character Demographics: Comparison to U.S. Census Data

The comparison between the data in this sample of commercials and the data from the U.S. Census for sex, age and race is shown in Figure 1, and for occupation in Figure 2. Each set of data will be discussed separately below.

Sex. There were more male characters (52.17%) in the sample of commercials than females (47.83%). As Figure 1 illustrates, the reverse ratio is true of the U.S. population; females are underrepresented significantly on TV commercials ($p < .001$). Despite the statistical significance of this finding, however, the difference in the number of males and females presented in commercials is surprisingly small. The findings of previous studies on TV commercials have shown a much higher ratio of males to females, as have Gerbner's studies of prime time dramatic programming which indicate that males outnumber females 3 to 1 (Gerbner et al., 1980b).

The ratio of male to female characters varied greatly by product type, however. Females made up the majority of characters in only six types of commercials: cleaners, hygiene, feminine hygiene & beauty, apparel, toys, and home furnishings. The highest ratio of females to males occurred in ads for feminine hygiene & beauty (78.6% female) and cleaners (67.3%).

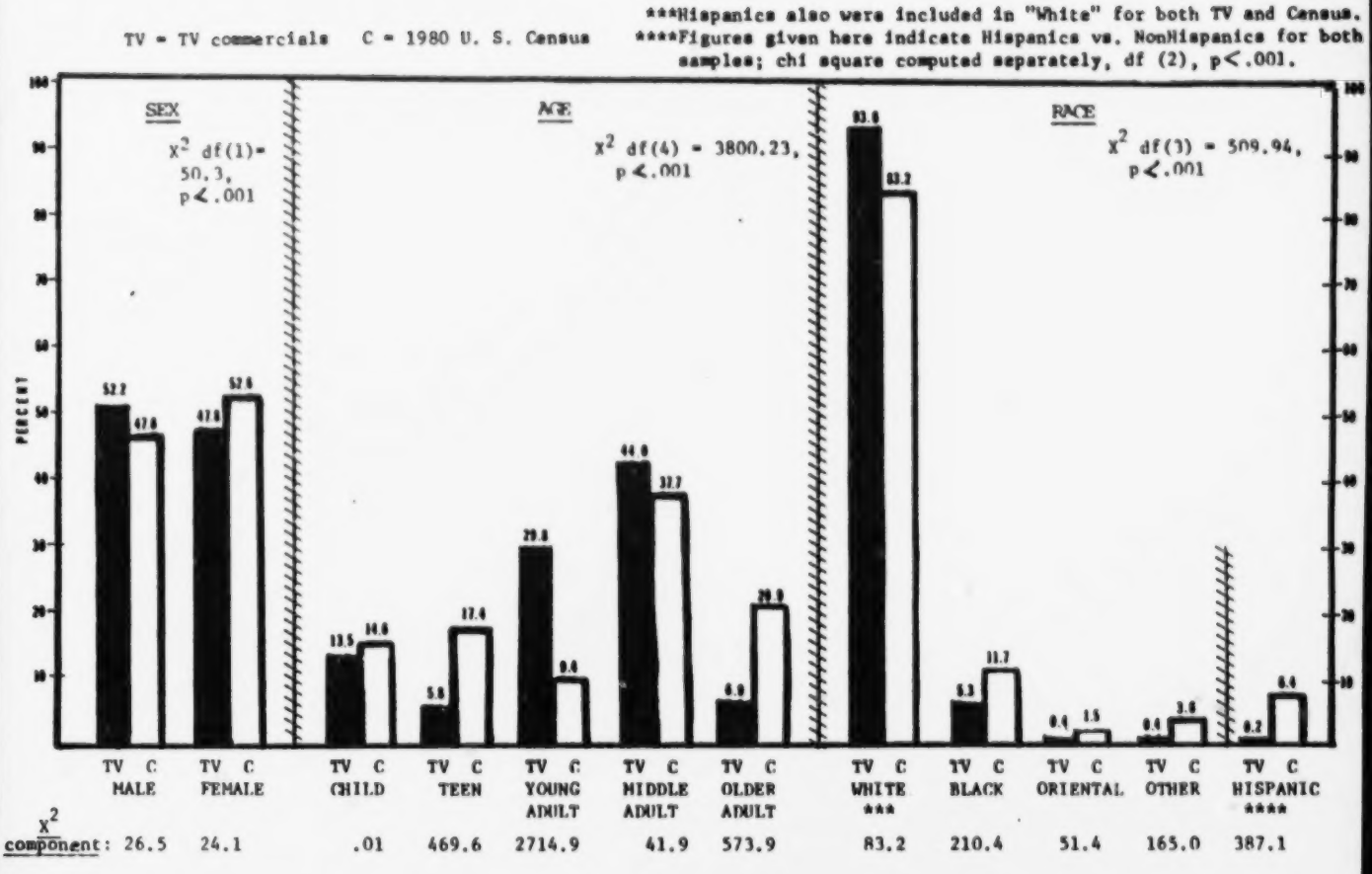

Figure 1. Comparison of TV commercials to U.S. census data for the variables of sex, age and race.

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Only four product types approached the ratio of 3 males to 1 female that Gerbner found in programs (alcohol (80.2% males), auto (70.6%), travel (67.2%) and finance (66.7%)), and they constituted only 13% of the ads in the total sample.

Age. Nearly half (44.0%) of all characters shown were middle-aged adults (approximately 25-55); another 30% were portrayed as young adults (approximately age 20-24). As Figure 1 illustrates, teenagers and the elderly were the most underrepresented age groups on commercials, each accounting for about one third of what would be expected from the Census figures.

The age distribution also varied by sex of the character. Compared with Census figures, commericals significantly misrepresent the proportion of males and females at every age level except as teenagers, overrepresenting females as young adults (65% female in commercials, 50% female in Census), and overrepresenting males as middle-aged adults (59% male in commercials, 48% in Census) and older adults (59% male in commercials, 42% in Census). In sum, then, young adults are overrepresented on commercials by nearly 3 to 1, with majority being female, while older adults are underrepresented by nearly 3 to 1, with the majority being male.

Race. TV commercials significantly underrepresented all non-white characters, as indicated by Figure 1: 94% of the characters were white, compared to 83% of the U.S. population. As a group, Hispanics were the most underrepresented group on the commercials (accounting for only 0.2% of the characters), by a ratio of more than 20 to 1. In contrast to individual characters, however, a little more than a third of the crowds shown in commercials contained one or more non-white characters, which may indicate that advertisers are starting

to move away from all-white casts.

Occupation. The frequency distribution of occupations showed that about 60% of the characters (54.9% of males, 66.8% of females) were shown in no occupational role. About 35% of all characters were shown in occupational roles outside of the home (44.6% of males, 23.6% of females). The remainder of the characters (almost entirely females) were homemakers (9.6% of females, 0.6% of males). It is important to note that females appeared much more frequently in occupational roles than as homemakers, a dramatic change from the findings of earlier studies of character portrayals in TV commercials.

Males made up the majority of all non-home occupations except private service and clerical. Employed males were most often shown as product representatives (16.2%), professionals (12.4%) and sports/entertainment (12.4%); employed females appeared most frequently in sports/entertainment (22.0%), followed by 16.7% professional and 14.9% celebrity.

The occupational roles in which males and females were portrayed varied widely depending on the type of product advertised. Nearly three-fourths of the on-screen product representatives were males, and males were used more often as product representatives for all product types except cleaners, apparel and female hygiene & beauty. The products least likely to have female product representatives were auto, finance, restaurant, retail and medicine. Medicine commercials showed a particularly interesting dichotomy in roles for males and females, with males almost always appearing as product representatives, professionals or sick husbands, and females generally appearing as customers or wives and mothers caring for their families.

Both male and female characters portrayed as homemakers appeared almost exclusively in commercials for food and cleaners. Although overall only

9.6% of female characters were portrayed as homemakers, in cleaner ads nearly 16% and in food ads more than 30% of the females were shown as homemakers.

The comparison of occupations in TV commercials with those in the 1980 U.S. Census appears in Figure 2. TV commercials significantly underrepresented the occupational categories of blue collar, operative, transport operative, sales, clerical, crafts and private service; they overrepresented farm, managerial and professional occupations. The overrepresentation of managerial and professional occupations is partly due to the large proportion of characters shown as product representatives, celebrities and in sports/entertainment.

Despite the previously mentioned large differences between the numbers of males and females shown in the different occupational categories on commercials, there were relatively few instances of differences in the ratio of males to females for each occupation when compared with the Census. Females were significantly underrepresented only for operative, service and private service occupations ($p < .001$) and managerial ($p < .05$). However, females were slightly underrepresented in all other categories except crafts, so that when comparing the total ratio of employed males to employed females for the TV commercials and the Census, we found that commercials did significantly underrepresent working females by a ratio of 1.3 to 1 ($p < .001$).

To sum up the findings concerning the demographic characteristics of characters portrayed on commercials, TV commercials did significantly underrepresent females, teenagers, the elderly, all minority racial groups, and all occupational categories except farm,managerial and professional. They greatly overrepresented females as young adults and underrepresented them as middle-aged and older adults. The portrayal of females as homemakers has

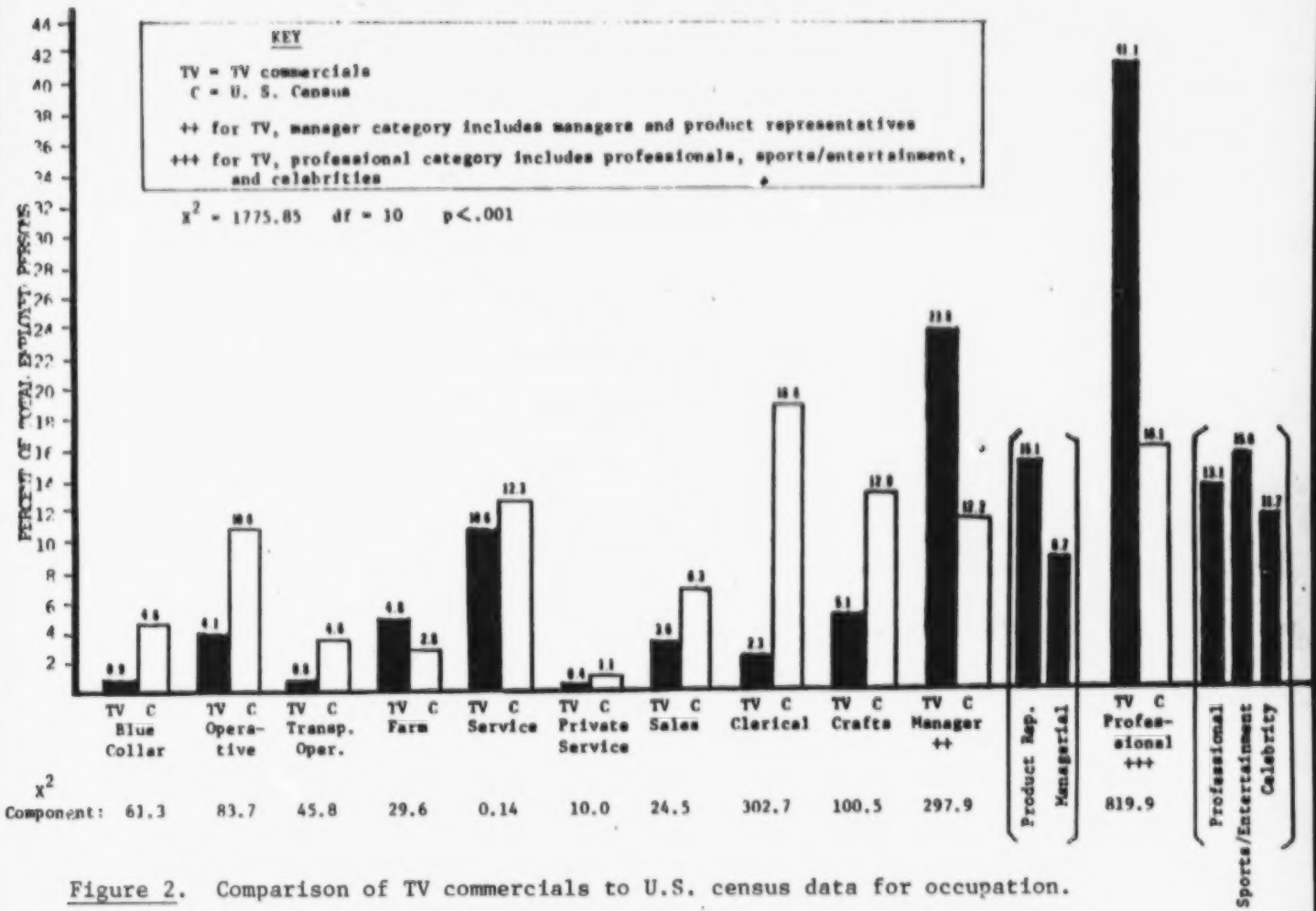
KEY
TV = TV commercials
C = U. S. Census
++ for TV, manager category includes managers and product representatives
+++ for TV, professional category includes professionals, sports/entertainment, and celebrities
χ^2 = 1775.85 df = 10 p<.001
PERCENT OF TOTAL EMPLOYED PERSONS
TV C Blue Collar
TV C Operative
TV C Transp. Oper.
TV C Farm
TV C Service
TV C Private Service
TV C Sales
TV C Clerical
TV C Crafts
TV C Manager ++
Product Rep. Managerial
TV C Professional +++
Professional Sports/Entertainment Celebrity
χ^2 Component: 61.3 83.7 45.8 29.6 0.14 10.0 24.5 302.7 100.5 297.9 819.9

Figure 2. Comparison of TV commercials to U.S. census data for occupation.

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changed dramatically from earlier findings, with females shown more than twice as often in occupational roles than as homemakers. This is particularly surprising given the large proportion of the sample that occurred during weekday daytime hours and soap operas, and the high percentage of ads for housework-related products. Still, commercials are lagging behind real world percentages in portraying working women.

Other Gender Differences in Character Portrayals

In addition to gender differences in age and occupation, more subtle differences were found for character concerns, relationships and social power.

Concerns. Overall, female characters exhibited many more concerns than did males (see Figure 3). The greatest percentage of both male and female characters were concerned with having fun. However, females were significantly more likely to be concerned with beauty, cleanliness, social recognition, family, health, love, sex, growing older, being in style and pleasing others ($p < .001$ for all). Males showed a significantly higher frequency of concern only for having fun ($p < .05$) and achievement ($p < .001$). The biggest difference between male and female concerns was for pleasing others, with females nearly five times more likely to exhibit such a concern than males.

Relationships. Nearly 65% of the parents shown were mothers. Of all male characters shown, only 7.4% were portrayed as fathers, compared with 14.3% of all females portrayed as mothers. This varied by product type somewhat: in medicine commercials, where the overall number of male and female characters were nearly equal, there were 30 mothers shown and only 7 fathers; in ads for

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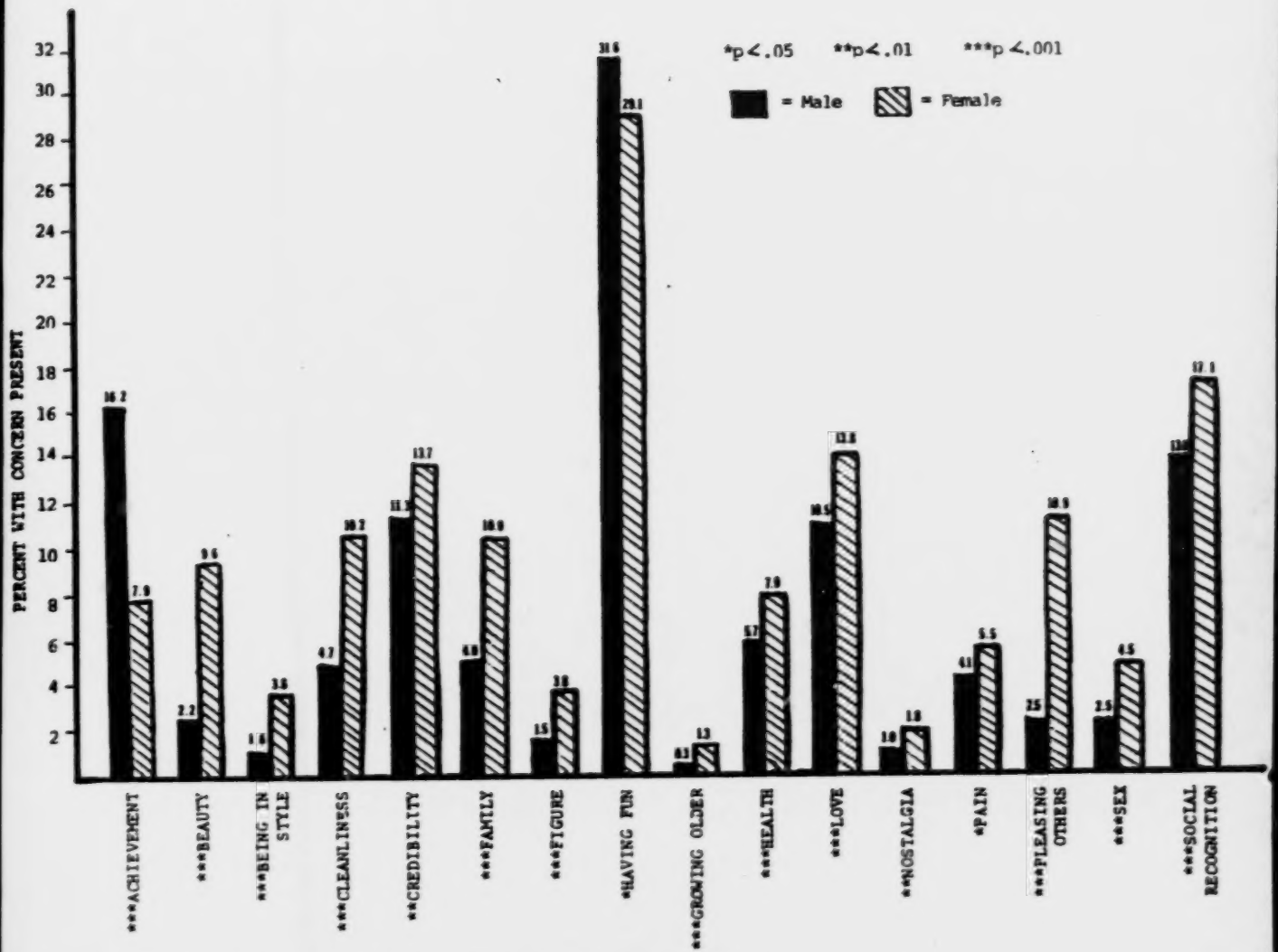


Figure 3. Comparison of personal concerns by sex of character.

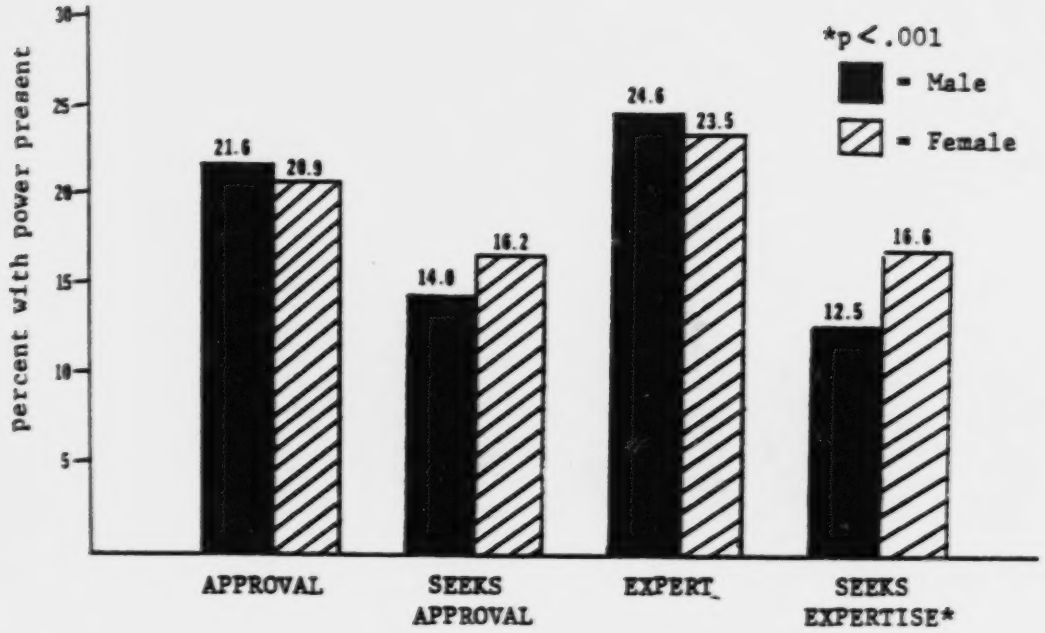
cleaners, of the 61 parents shown, more than 80% were mothers.

Social power. Four dimensions of social power were coded for each character: power of reward/approval, seeking reward/approval, expert power, and seeking expertise. The best example to illustrate these forms of power is a typical food commercial in which the wife knows how to prepare a meal but seeks approval from her family when she serves it, while her husband gives his approval for a well-cooked meal but also asks for help or information (e.g.,"how do you get your fried chicken so crisp?").

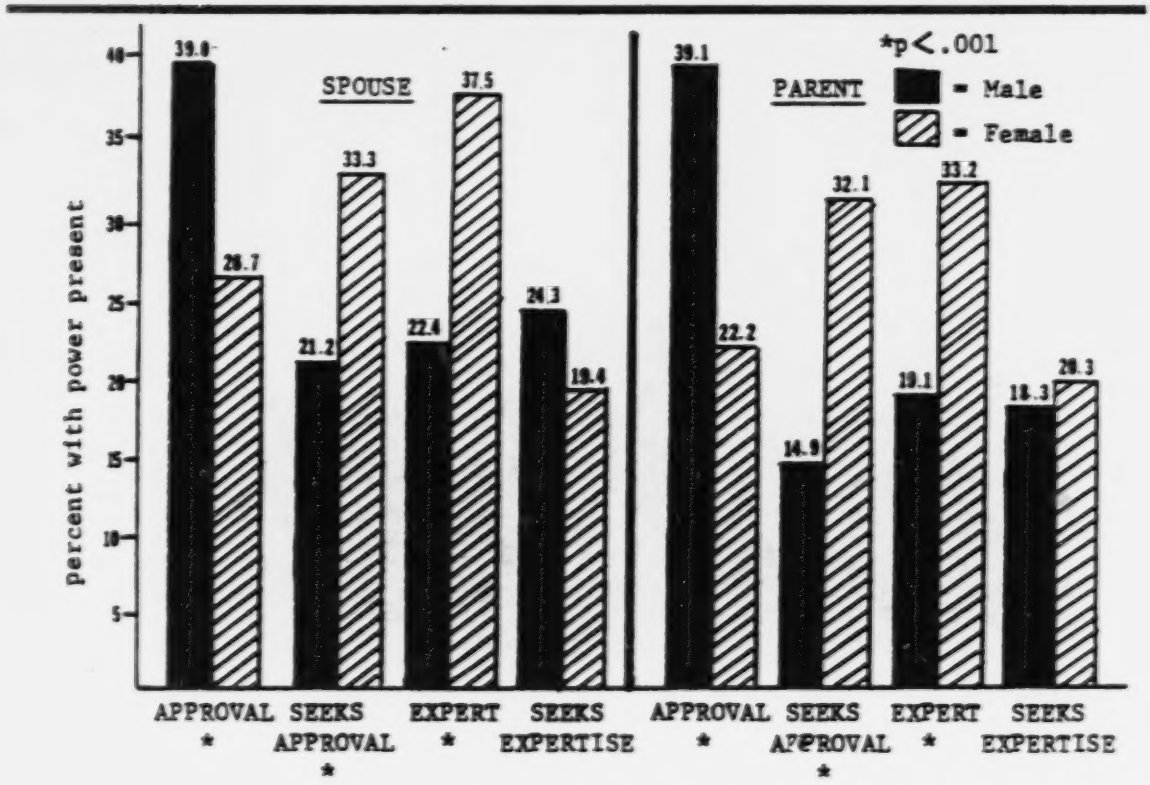
The findings for social power are illustrated in Figure 4. The only significant difference in overall power for males and females is that females weremore likely to be shown seeking information or expertise than males; males and females were equally likely to have expertise. This is surprising in light of previous reports that females were portrayed as less intelligent and less powerful than males.

There were also almost no significant differences in power for males and females portrayed in occupational roles. However, when character power was analyzed by spouse and parent relationships, much greater significant differences appeared. As Figure 4 illustrates, when female characters were shown as wives and mothers, they were much more likely to have both expert power and to seek approval from others than were males shown as husbands or fathers ($p < .001$). Husbands and fathers, on the other hand, were much more likely to have power of approval than were wives and mothers ($p < .001$). The same trend appeared for males and females shown as parents.

As might be expected, the type of product had a strong impact on the types of power attributed to males and females. Males with expertise were



Comparison of power by sex of character.



Comparison of power by sex of character for spouse and parent relationships.

Figure 4.

fairly evenly distributed across product types, while more than 50% of the female characters with expert power appeared in commercials for food, cleaners or medicines. The percentage of males with expert power was particularly high in ads for retail, alcohol and medicines. Medicine ads, again, showed an interesting dichotomy: males had more expertise than females, both in total numbers and within every occupational category, expecially as product representatives; the exact opposite was true when males and females appeared in spouse or parent roles in medicine ads, where females overwhelmingly more often had expert power.

To sum up the findings concerning power, when males and females were shown in home and family situations and relationships, males generally tended to seek expertise and give approval, while females tended to have expertise and to seek approval. In other occupational roles, males and females were equally likely to have expert and approval power, but because more males are shown in those roles we see more males in occupational roles with expert and approval power than we do females. The findings that, as a whole, male and female characters were relatively equal in all types of power, then, reflects the fact that in the roles of wife and mother, women actually did have more expert power and less approval power than men, but the large number of males in occupational roles tends to even out the overall percentages for all types of social power for males and females.

It may be important to note that this type of quantitative assessment does not take into account the ascribed status we give to expertise about different tasks or types of knowledge. Expertise about housework or taking care of family members may not be perceived as expertise at all by many viewers. Nonetheless, females shown in commercials do not have less power than do males, only different types of power in different roles and different situations.

Social Values

The overall frequency distribution for instrumental and terminal values is shown in Figure 5. As the graph shows, the most frequently occurring instrumental values were "capable," "helpful," and "smart," each appearing in about one-fourth of the commercials. The least frequent instrumental values were "courageous," "forgiving," and "physically powerful." Of the three values related to personal appearance, the most frequently stressed was "beautiful" (10.7%), followed by "youthful" (7.3%). The instrumental value of being "sexy" occurred relatively infrequently, in only about 5% of the commercials. This is somewhat surprising given the amount of criticism concerning sex in advertising that has recently appeared in the popular press, as well as in previous content analyses (Komisar, 1971; Courtney & Whipple, 1981).

In contrast to the instrumental values, one terminal value clearly dominated the rest: "happiness," present in nearly 60% of the commercials, appeared more than twice as often as any other value. "Social recognition" was the second most frequent terminal value, appearing in 25.9% of the ads. "Equality" occurred in only 11 commercials of the total sample (0.4%). As with the instrumental value "sexy," "sexual gratification" occurred rarely in commercials as desirable goal (3.5%).

The instrumental and terminal values that were identified as self-serving or self-oriented appeared much more frequently than those more altruistic or other-oriented. Of the 14 altruistic values, only four appeared in more than 10% of the commercials ("helpful" (26.1%), "responsible" (16.5%), "frugal" (16.3%) and "family well-being" (17.0%)); nearly two-thirds of the self-oriented

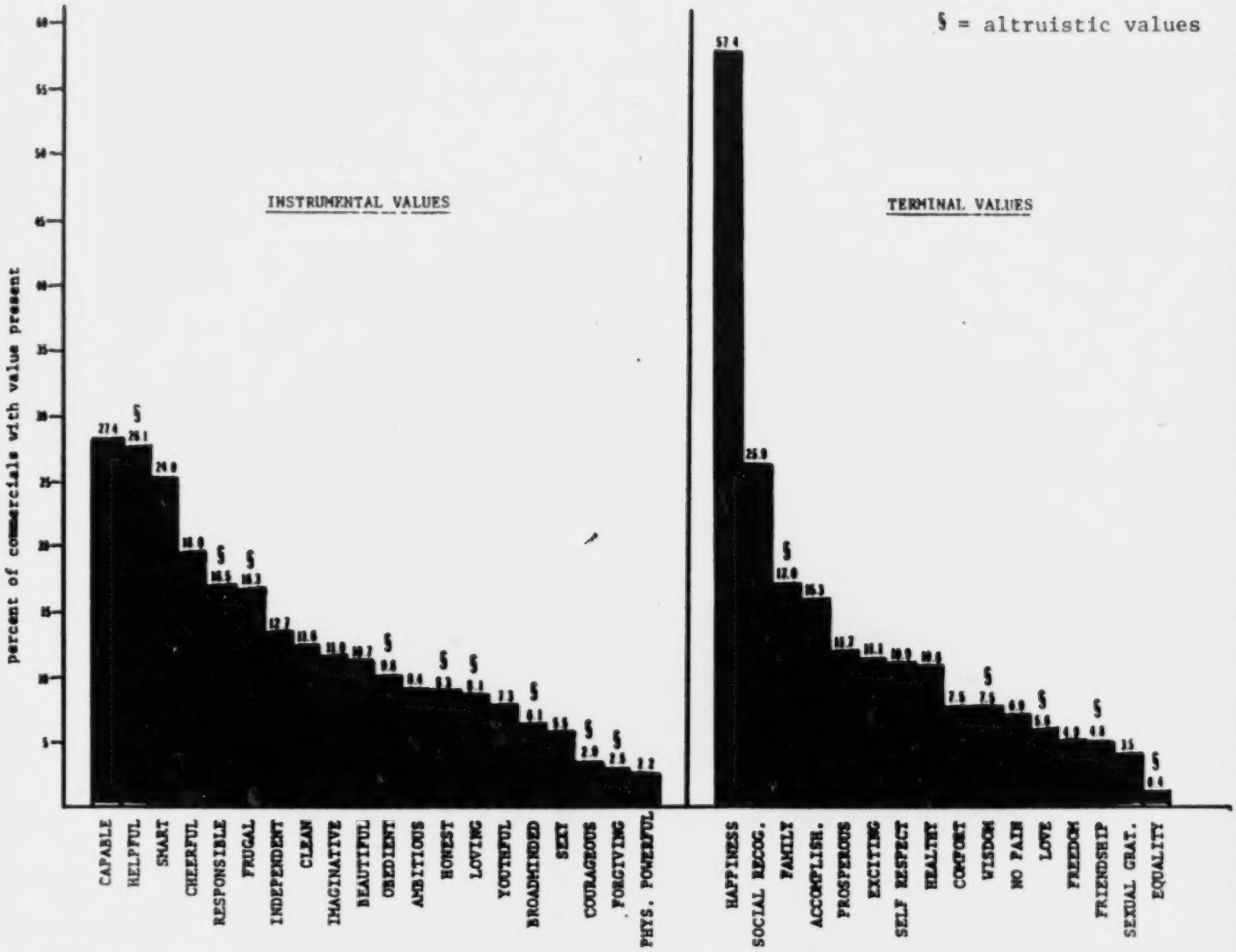


Figure 5. Frequency distribution of instrumental and terminal values.

values appeared at least that frequently.

The frequency of each value varied a great deal by time, program type and product type; some appeared to be almost entirely product-specific. Medicine commercials accounted for 81.6% of the commercials stressing "freedom from pain" (although for only 8% of those stressing "a healthy life"); ads for feminine hygiene & beauty and apparel accounted for nearly 50% of all commercials stressing "beautiful," "sexy," and "sexual gratification"; more than 70% of the ads stressing "a prosperous life" were for retail, finance or autos; and hygiene and cleaning product ads accounted for 87% of the ads using "clean."

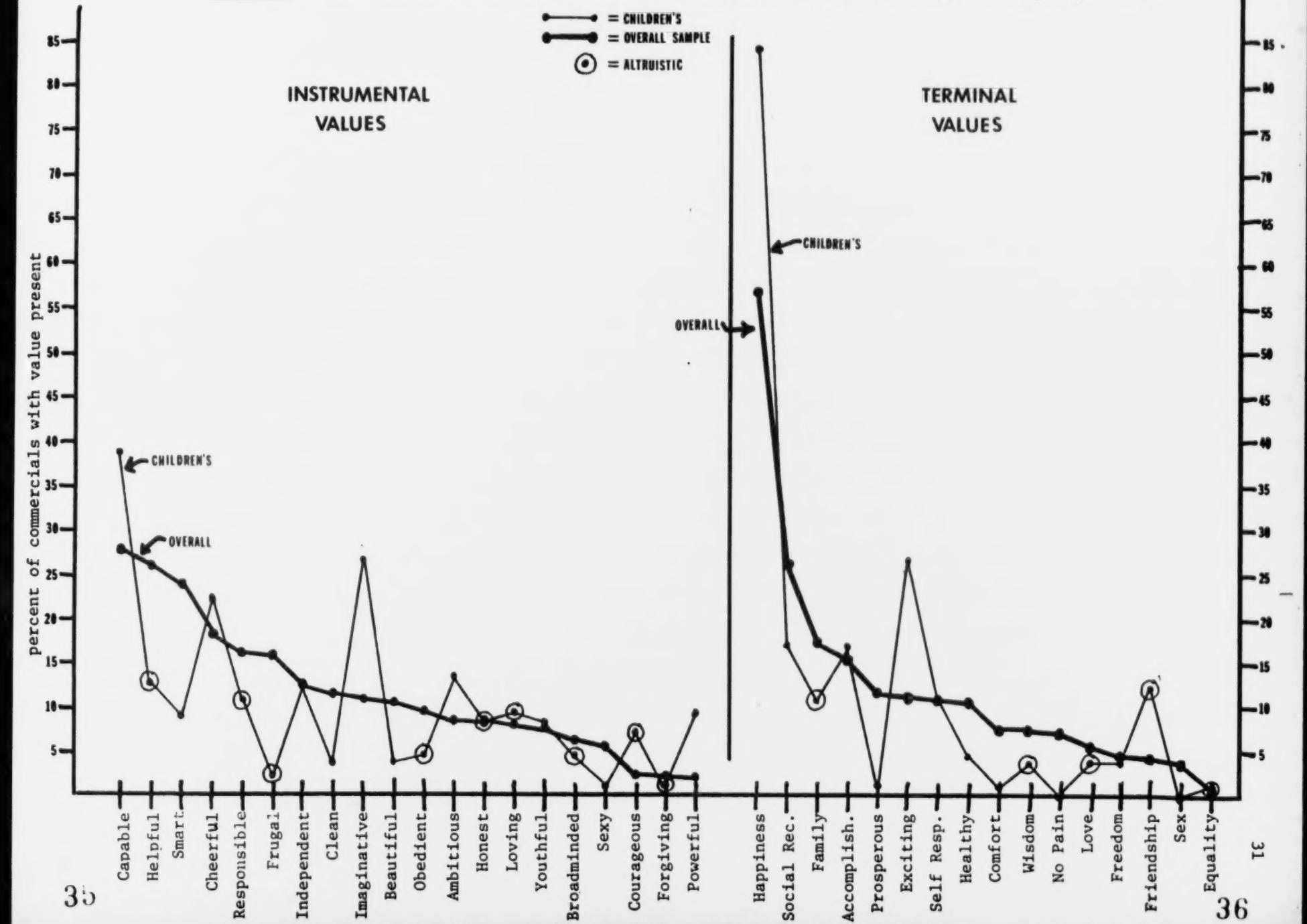
The value "happiness" varied more widely by commercial demographics (time, program and product type) than any other value. Overall, 57.4% of the commercials stressed happiness; this ranged, however, from 16.7% in commercials during religious programs and 36.4% during sports programs to a high of 84.3% of commercials shown during children's programs. The product types that least frequently showed the value "happiness" were medicines (26.3%), public service announcements (28.4%) and male hygiene & beauty (33.3%); those showing "happiness" most frequently were for soda (88.6%), toys (85.2%) and restaurants (84.4%).

It was possible to develop a value profile for different products types, times and programs. For example, commercials for pet products contained an unusual set of values: they had the highest frequency of any product type for the values of "helpful" (77.6%), "loving" (24.5%), and "family well-being" (63.3%). This was true despite the fact that subsequent analyses showed that children rarely appeared in ads for pet products, although spouses often did. Apparently pets are considered "family" on TV commercials.

Value profiles were used to look at two particular questions of interest: 1) what values are children most frequently exposed to on TV commercials? and 2) are different values used in commercials aimed primarily at females and those aimed primarily at males?

The value profile for commercials shown during children's programs appears in Figure 6. As the profile illustrates, the values most frequently appearing during children's programs were "happiness" (84.3%), "capable" (38.6%), "an exciting life" (26.5%), "imaginative" (26.5%), and "cheerful" (22.5%). Commercials during children's programs differed widely from the overall sample for most of the values, stressing much more frequently the values of "capable," "imaginative," "physically powerful," "happiness," "an exciting life," and "friendship." They stressed much less frequently the values of "helpful," "smart," "frugal," "clean," "beautiful," obedient," "a prosperous life," "physical comfort," and "freedom from pain." Children's commercials had lower frequencies than the overall sample for nearly all altruistic values; only "loving," "courageous," and "friendship" appeared with slightly higher frequency in children's ads than in the norm. In addition, commercials appearing during children's programs were the most of likely of any program type to stress "ambitious," "cheerful," "imaginative," "courageous," and "physically powerful," as well as "happiness," "an exciting life," and "friendship." They were the least likely of any program type to stress the values "helpful," "obedient," "responsible," and "smart," as well as "physical comfort" and living "a healthy life." In sum, children's ads tend to stress the importance of playing hard, having fun, and being happy; they rarely stress being helpful or obedient, the more altruistic values, or the importance of good health.

Figure 6. Value profile comparison for children's commercials (N=83) and overall sample (N=2604).



Commercials targeted to either males or females were identified in two ways: comparing the commercials shown during soap operas (whose audiences are primarily female)* with those shown during sports programs (whose audiences are primarily males)*; and comparing commercials for female hygiene & beauty with those for male hygiene & beauty products. These comparisons are shown in Figures 7 and 8.

As these figures illustrate, the programs and products that are targeted to males and females show extremely different value profiles. Comparing commercials shown during soap operas with those during sports programs, we find that soap operas are much more likely to have ads stressing "helpful," "clean," "beautiful," "obedient," "loving," "honest," "happines," "family well-being," "freedom from pain," and "love." Sports commercials are much more likely to stress "responsible," "frugal," "independent," "ambitious," "physically powerful," "accomplishment," "an exciting life," and "a prosperous life." The most frequent values for soap opera commercials were "happiness," "helpful," "social recognition," "smart," "capable," "clean" and "family"; for sports commercials, they were "happiness," "responsible," "capable," "social recognition," and "frugal."

Both sports and soap opera commercials tended to have value frequencies that were far from the overall mean: sports commercials had the highest frequencies of any program type for the values "frugal," "independent," "a prosperous life," and "equality," and the lowest frequencies for "honest," "broadminded," and "family well-being." Soap opera commercials had the highest frequencies for "clean," "forgiving," "social recognition," and "love."

*Nielsen Reports, 1982.

Figure 7. Value profile comparison for soap opera commercials (N=511) and sports commercials (N=121).

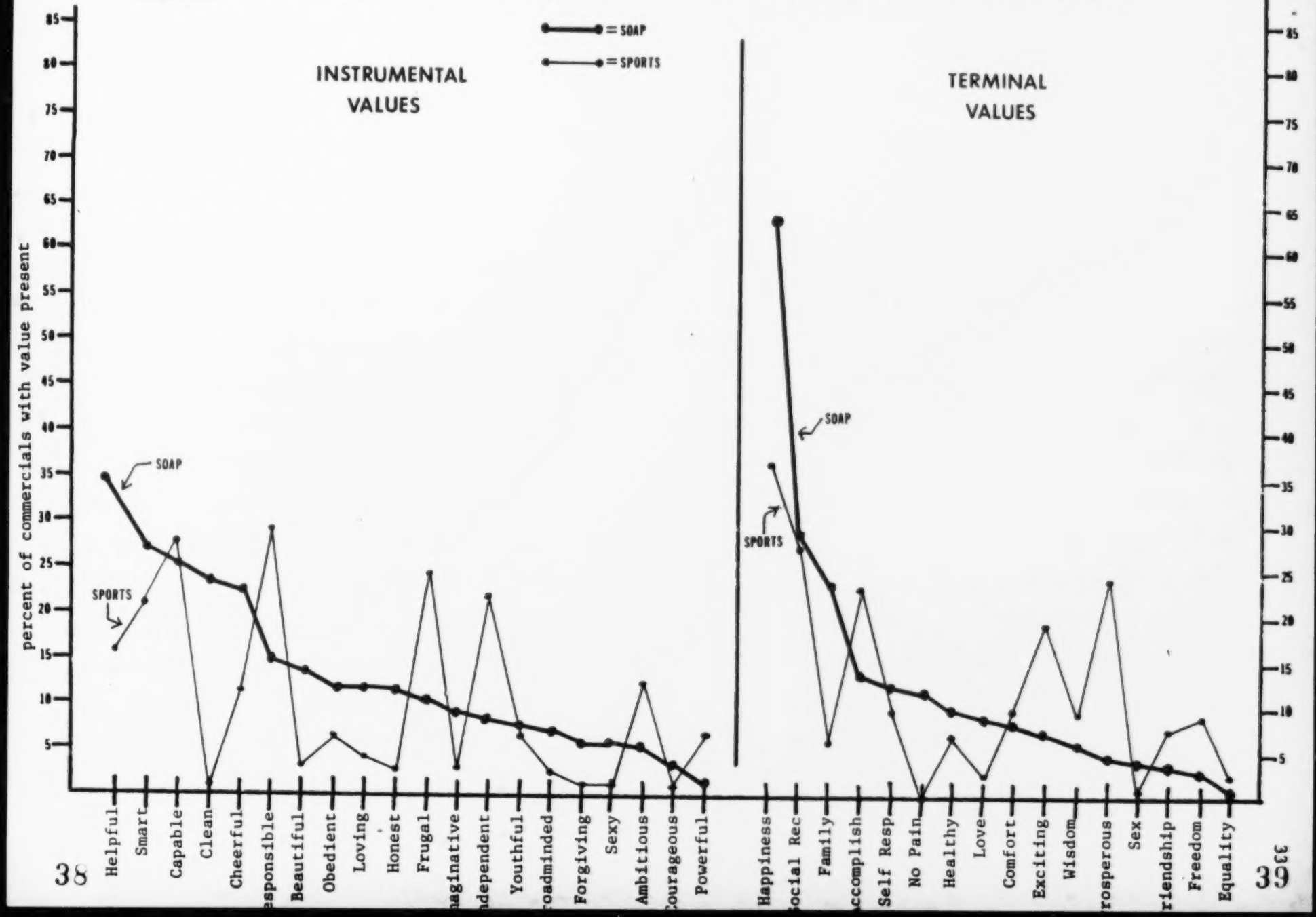
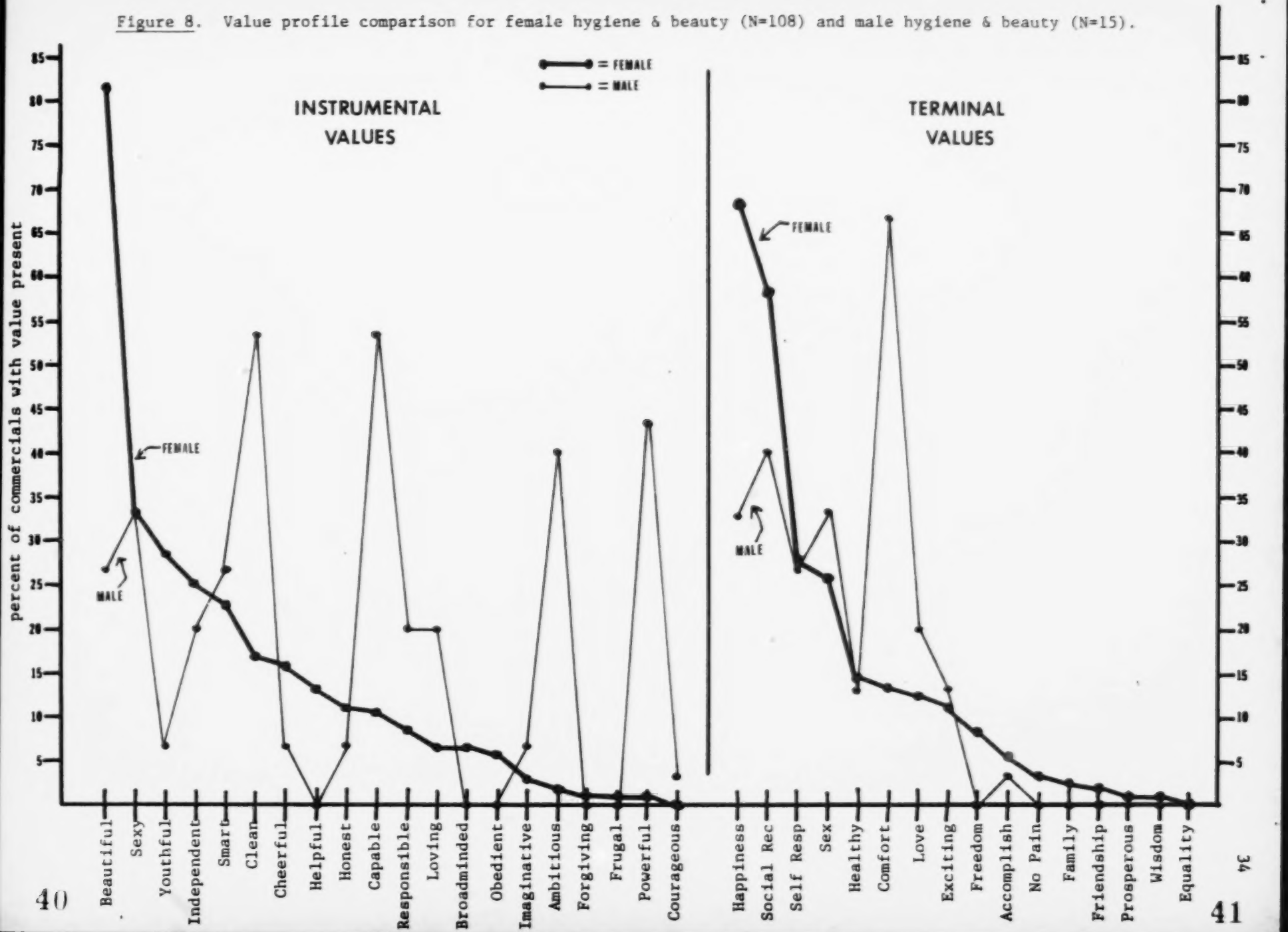


Figure 8. Value profile comparison for female hygiene & beauty (N=108) and male hygiene & beauty (N=15).



The value profile comparison between male hygiene & beauty and female hygiene & beauty products (Figure 8) shows an even greater dichotomy, although somewhat different value frequencies than were seen in the program comparison. The most frequent values in female hygiene & beauty ads were "beautiful," "happiness," "social recognition," "sexy," and "youthful"; for the same products targeted to males, the most frequent values were "physical comfort," "capable," "clean," "physically powerful," and "ambitious." Female hygiene & beauty ads were much more likely to stress "beautiful," "youthful," "helpful," "happiness," and "social recognition" than were those for male products; male hygiene & beauty ads were much more likely to stress "clean," "capable," "responsible," "loving," "ambitious," "physically powerful," and "physical comfort" than were those for female products.

As with the program comparison, the products targeted to males or females often appeared at the extreme ends of the range of frequencies across all product types. For example, male hygiene & beauty products had the highest frequency of any product type for the values "capable," "ambitious," "physically powerful," "love," "physical comfort," "sexual gratification," and the lowest frequency for "helpful." Female hygiene & beauty products had the highest frequencies for "beautiful" and "youthful."

Some caution should be taken in viewing these hygiene & beauty ad comparisons, given that the sample size of the male hygiene & beauty ads was very small (N=15). However, in conjunction with the soap opera/sports comparison, these results do indicate differences in the values targeted to females and those targeted to males.

To sum up the value profiles of commercials directed specifically toward one gender or the other, those commercials targeted to females were more likely

to stress the importance of being helpful, beautiful, youthful, cheerful and obedient, and of seeking happiness and family well-being. Those aimed at males were more likely to stress the importance of being capable, ambitious, responsible, independent and physically powerful, and of seeking accomplishment, physical comfort, an exciting life and a prosperous life.

DISCUSSION

What do we know, then, from this content analysis of TV commercials? The findings may be summarized in terms of four issues: 1) the variation in TV commercial content across program and product types, and the resulting implications; 2) comparing the "world" shown in TV commercials with a measure of "reality"; 3) a summary of gender differences found in character portrayals and values; and 4) the usefulness of studying social values presented in TV commercials.

Variation by Program and Product Type

Evidence of a great deal of variation across different types of products and programs was found, and given the strong correlation between time of day and program type, may be extended to the day and time during which the commercial was shown as well. There are two implications of this finding. First, this knowledge can be useful in studying the effects of television on different types of viewers (not only children, males and females, but also people who watch only specific types of programs or at certain times of the viewing day). We can pinpoint with some accuracy the types of character portrayals and values they are most likely to be exposed to. Second, it emphasizes the importance of studying more than just prime time content - for while one does gain knowledge about the content that the largest numbers of people are exposed to when

studying only prime time television, that knowledge is not complete nor representative of all TV commercials. The most interesting findings in this study involved largely commercials shown during non-prime time periods.

One limitation of this study is that the sample was taken only during the month of March. Given variation over the course of the viewing week, it seems likely that TV commercial content will vary by month or season of the year as well. This will be the focus of future research.

Comparing the World of TV Commercials to Reality

How realistic is the world of TV commercials? In terms of demographic representativeness, not very. TV commercials underrepresent females, teenagers, the elderly, all racial minorities, and nearly all occupational categories except managerial, professional and farm. In addition, they generally portray females as much younger on the average than is true in the U.S. population. However, this seems to be changing slowly; previous findings concerning sex, age and occupation of characters in TV commercials reported much larger differences (particularly for gender variables), although some of these differences may be due to methodological factors.

It is important to note here that not only is it an open question as to whether or not TV commercials should accurately represent the U.S. population, but it is certainly doubtful that they really could. While we believe that an increase in portrayals of minority and elderly characters would be beneficial, it is the authors' feelings that the results of this study should be used to help determine how viewers' perceptions of the real world might be affected by what they see on television, and not as a chastisement to advertisers.

Gender Differences in Character Portrayals and Values

There are differences in the ways males and females are portrayed on TV commercials, albeit some are rather surprising. Occupational roles for women

have changed considerably since the early 1970s; many more women are shown in occupational roles in TV commercials today than are shown as homemakers. The occupations shown as appropriate for women are also less traditional and less stereotyped than has been reported in the past.

Roles for males have not changed as much; males seldom are portrayed as fathers or involved with housework. In contrast to occupational roles, the concerns coded for males and females still strongly reflect traditional sex differences: females were much more likely to be concerned with appearance and family, while males were more likely to be concerned with personal achievement. The value profiles for commercials targeted to males or females reflect these same traditional values: being female seems to mean being cheerful, helpful and attractive; being male seems to mean being ambitious, capable, and powerful.

Women, however, are not portrayed as "unintelligent," "submissive," or "powerless," as Hennessee and Nicholson (1972) concluded from earlier content analyses. Overall and in occupational roles women were as likely to have expert and reward power as were men. In spouse and parent roles, furthermore, wives and mothers were much more likely to have expertise than were husbands and fathers, although males in those roles were more likely to have power of approval. This presents an interesting dichotomy: wives know how to do things, but husbands can say whether they like them or not.

Rokeach's Social Values

Rokeach's categories of social values provide an extremely useful way of analyzing the content of TV commercials. Not only do they indicate the types of social values stressed (and not stressed) in commercials, but they also complement the information learned from analyses of character portrayals

(e.g., what males and females should be like).

Although the rankings were determined in completely different ways, it is interesting to compare the frequency distribution of values in this study of TV commercials with the rank-ordering of values that Rokeach found using a national area probability sample of 1430 adults in 1971 (Rokeach, 1979). This comparison is given below, with the TV commercials "ranks" computed based on order of frequency of occurrence in the sample (highest-ranked values only).

	Adult Ranking	Values	TV Commercial Ranking
Instrumental:	1	Honest	13
	2	Responsible	5
	3	Ambitious	12
	4	Forgiving	19
	5	Broadminded	16
	6	Courageous	18
Terminal:	1	A world of peace	- (not coded)
	2	Family well being	3
	3	Freedom	13
	4	Equality	16

In addition, the values ranked as least important by Rokeach's sample were often those appearing most frequently in the sample of TV commercials: cheerful (ranked 4th in commercials), obedient (11), smart (3), imaginative (9), happiness (1), social recognition (2), and an exciting life (6).

This comparison shows that Rokeach's adults ranked altruistic and societal level values quite highly, while the same values appeared infrequently or not at all in TV commercials. The values shown most frequently in commercials, conversely, were often those ranked as least important in Rokeach's study. This may or may not predict that exposure to television commercials will lead people to rank altruistic values less highly. TV commercials may present a distorted picture of the values important in a given society; perhaps the values that are most important to members of a society are taken for granted or are relatively

unalterable, and are therefore not shown in commercials. The analysis of values in ads does tell us something about business or entreprenural values and the conceptions that advertisers have of what is considered important or desirable in our culture. In any case, such comparisons should be studied further, and may tell us a great deal in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

There are several conclusions to be drawn from research such as this, as well as indications for future research. First, the amount of research related to the effects of television on the attitudes and behaviors of viewers has grown astronomically over the past decade. The results of this study should serve to reiterate the importance of knowing what is actually on TV that viewers are exposed to, in conjunction with attempting to study what effect such content has. Unfortunately, much of the research in the field of television has progressed along two parallel lines: by communications researchers who have a good grasp of the content of television and how TV is used by viewers (from a uses and gratifications paradigm), but without much attention to the psychological makeup of the viewers themselves; and by developmental and social psychologists who have studied effects of television largely in experimental situations frequently working with artificially produced TV stimuli, without a working knowledge of the precise nature of the content to which viewers are exposed in their everyday lives. Gerbner and his colleagues are among the few attempting to bridge this gap, by combining message unit analyses with his cultivation analyses. Despite criticisms of his techniques, his incorporation of knowledge about television content into his research and theories about

the effects of television on viewers is extremely important, and might serve as an impetus for other researchers in the fields of psychology and human development.

This is especially crucial for any type of ecological research, in attempting to go beyond discovering how television can affect the cognitions, attitudes and behaviors of viewers, to how it does affect them in real life.

Second, TV commercial content does provide at least some insight into the cultural norms and values held by a given society (even if only reflecting the perspective of the advertising and business community). Our TV commercials do reflect to some extent America's obsessions with youthfulness, dieting, cleanliness, pets, sugared cereals, etc. It should be interesting in the future to explore how the content of commercials, in terms of character portrayals and social values, varies across different cultures and in different countries. For example, a comparison of the demographic makeup of characters in TV commercials shown in the United States and those shown in Japan (where elderly adults are much more revered) might be expected to reflect in some way these different cultural attitudes towards aging. In a different vein, cross-cultural empirical research on children's understanding of the messages in TV commercials might also reflect cultural differences, as well as helping to distinguish between developmental and experiential determinants of comprehension.

TV commercials are an important aspect of television in American society. What little we know of their content and their effects on viewers may lead us to conclude that they will be an extremely important focus for research on the nature of television effects on both children and adults in the future.

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